



Culture Notes

GO

By Kazuki Kaneshiro

Translated by Takami Nieda

Amazon Crossing, 2018

Fiction, Set in Japan

2018 Winner, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult / High School Literature

"Two young lovers... one little secret."

So reads the book jacket for *Go*, a contemporary love story set in Tokyo, Japan. But as with many star-crossed lovers, if teenagers Sugihara (pronounced: "sue-GHEE-HA-ra") and Sakurai (pronounced: "sah-KOO-RYE") are to be together, they must first overcome many intractable socio-cultural obstacles. Although Sakurai doesn't know it, her boyfriend Sugihara is actually Korean-Japanese, a member of an ethnic minority in Japan that has a long history of cultural exclusion and discrimination.



Relations between Japan and Korea before 1945

Korea and Japan's cultural ties date back before the Common Era, but the modern relationship began in the late sixteenth century. In 1592, the Japanese warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi (pronounced: "toy-YO-TOE-me" | "hee-DAY-YO-she") ordered his troops to invade Korea, commanding them to "mow down everyone universally, without discriminating between young and old, men and women, clergy and the laity—high ranking soldiers on the battlefield, that goes without saying, but also the hill folk, down to the poorest and meanest—and send the heads to Japan."¹ Historians estimate that Japanese troops killed approximately 200,000 Koreans in this punitive expedition.

Fortunately, relations improved dramatically over the next three centuries, as Japan and Korea became significant trading partners. Using the island of Tsushima (pronounced: "sue-SHE-ma") as a trading port, both Korean as well as Japanese traders crossed the Korean straits. By the end of the nineteenth century, Japanese political leaders came to see Korea as crucial to their own nation's survival.

¹ Toyotomi Hideyoshi as quoted in Samuel Hawley, *The Imjin War: Japan's Sixteenth-Century Invasion of Korea and Attempt to Conquer China* (Royal Asiatic Society-Korea Branch: 2005), 465-466.

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When European imperialists began establishing a significant presence in Northeast Asia, Japan decided it was necessary to seize direct control over Korea. After militarily defeating the Chinese and the Russians, and after engaging in tense diplomatic conflicts with France and Germany, Tokyo declared Korea to be a Japanese colony in 1910. For the next 35 years, Japan and Korea became increasingly and inextricably linked together, including socially, politically, economically, and culturally. Of course, this relationship was never seen as existing between two equals. As the dominant **colonizers**, Japan used its superior military and economic might to control Korea and extract its valuable resources. As part of the so-called “Yen Bloc,” financial planners in Tokyo sought to integrate Korea’s economy into Japan’s and eventually 53% of Korea’s arable land was owned by Japanese investors. Koreans were not passive victims within this relationship. In 1919, for instance, they rose up in rebellion, but Japanese troops suppressed them violently. Facing difficult economic prospects at home, many Koreans determined to look elsewhere for economic security. Between 1910 and 1945, approximately 1,000,000 Koreans emigrated to Japan.

With the beginning of World War II, Japan became even more dependent on Korea for raw materials and labor. Nearly 2,000,000 Koreans were conscripted to serve in war-related industries, most of which were located in the Japanese home islands. Many of these laborers worked in munitions factories, in mines, or in the construction industry. All of them faced **institutionalized discrimination** and often worked in terrible and dangerous conditions. After the war ended in 1945, most **repatriated** to Korea, but perhaps 700,000 remained in Japan and became known as the **Zainichi** 在日 (pronounced: “za-E-KNEE-chee”).

Post-World War II Zainichi

For those Koreans who remained in Japan following the war, their political status was very ambiguous. No longer were they subjects within the Japanese empire, nor were they accepted as Japanese citizens. To complicate matters, the United Nations had cut the Korean peninsula along the 39th Parallel, effectively creating two independent states. Japan’s Koreans were, in effect, stateless individuals. Stuck in this ambiguous limbo, they became known simply as Zainichi, which translates as “existing in Japan.”



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In the Japanese government's eyes, they were foreigners, required to carry an identification card and be fingerprinted, conditions similar to those required of criminals. By the 1950s, the Zainichi had established many of their own organizations and structures to protect their interests. Two main groups emerged. The first, known as **Mindan** **민단**, (pronounced: "min-dan") was generally more closely associated with the South Korean government. The Mindan published Korean-language newspapers, operated Korean-language schools, and advocated for the rights of the Zainichi. Approximately 65% of the non-naturalized Koreans in Japan identified with the Mindan organization. The second group was known as **Chongryon** **총련** (pronounced: "chong-ron"). Like Mindan, Chongryon also published newspapers and established schools. It too provided legal, financial, and social support to its members. With backing from the North Korean government, Chongryon was much more active in advocating for Korean interests, especially as they overlapped with the interests of the North Korean government. Chongryon schools not only taught Korean history and culture, they also taught Marxism and instilled loyalty toward the North Korean communist regime.

Zainichi from both organizations were the frequent targets of **discrimination** within Japan. They often worked in the so-called "3D" occupations, those that were dirty, dangerous, and demeaning. These included restaurants, construction companies, and pachinko parlors. At the same time, they suffered from housing discrimination, as unofficial housing practices kept them from living in desirable neighborhoods and pushed them instead into so-called Koreatowns. Tokyo's Koreatown was home to 80,000 individuals. Osaka's held 90,000. Zainichi also had lower education levels, in part a function of the inferior Korean-language schools which failed to prepare their students for the highly competitive college entrance exams. In popular culture, the Zainichi have frequently been portrayed as culturally backward and often as criminals. Not surprisingly, there are occasional large and vocal anti-Zainichi protests that erupt in Japanese cities, many times organized by ultra-nationalist political groups demanding the repatriation of all Korean-Japanese. Consequently, many Zainichi attempted to **assimilate** into Japanese society or minimize their Korean identity. Some adopted Japanese names, some chose to attend Japanese schools, and some became naturalized Japanese citizens.



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Contemporary Zainichi

In 1993 the government in Tokyo granted the Zainichi “Special Permanent Resident,” meaning they no longer needed to be fingerprinted. Since then, relations between the Zainichi and the Japanese have improved significantly. More and more Zainichi are choosing to become **naturalized Japanese citizens**, taking Japanese names, and surrendering their **Korean identity**. At the same time, Korean culture is increasingly seen as chic and desirable as K-Pop has swept across Japan. Today, many of the most beloved actors, performers, and artists in Japan are Korean or Korean-Japanese.

Nevertheless, **anti-Korean sentiment** continues to lurk beneath the surface. Liberal-minded Japanese are embarrassed by their ultra-nationalist fellow citizens and would never consider participating in their anti-Korean protests. Nonetheless, many of these still harbor feelings of superiority relative to the Zainichi. For them, **intermarriage** or even romantic assignations between Japanese and Koreans are repugnant. Such individuals would forbid their child from dating a Zainichi and some would even hire private investigators to verify a potential son- or daughter-in-law’s family background. Ranging from micro-aggressions to unlawful violence, the Zainichi continue to suffer innumerable indignities at the hands of their Japanese neighbors. As right-wing nationalist movements have grown in popularity in the U.S., the Philippines, the UK and elsewhere, Japan has also witnessed the resurgence of racist organizations. Consequently, relations between the Japanese and their Zainichi neighbors remain problematic and potentially volatile.

Author: David Kenley, Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences, Dakota State University

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Suggested Readings and Resources

Hawley, Samuel. *The Imjin War: Japan’s Sixteenth-Century Invasion of Korea and Attempt to Conquer China*. Royal Asiatic Society-Korea Branch, 2005.